

High Turnout in the Low Countries: Partisan Effects of Turnout in Belgium and the Netherlands

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom holds that left-of-center parties ought to do better in elections with higher rates of turnout. There have been numerous studies examining the theoretical roots and empirical results of the partisan effects of turnout. We address the conventional wisdom relating turnout with partisan consequences with data collected from postwar elections in Belgium and the Netherlands. Voting is compulsory in Belgium, and was compulsory in the Netherlands between 1917 and 1970. If the conventional wisdom is correct, we should observe a decline in vote share among leftist parties in the Netherlands under the treatment condition relative to pre-1970, or to the Belgian control case. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, however, we find leftist Dutch parties have benefited from lower turnout. We demonstrate this unconventional finding using difference-in-differences and matching methods. We then turn to survey data to examine characteristics of Dutch abstainers in a set of elections (1971-2006), and speculate that abolishing compulsory voting in Belgium would marginally increase the leftist vote share in Flanders, but have no effect in Wallonia.

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The partisan implications embedded in variations in voter turnout is a core question in the field of electoral research. The question is an important one, because while the normative claim is that higher turnout rates are desirable, a high level of turnout might benefit one party over another (Hansford and Gomez, 2010). Consequently, a large number of papers have been written on this question with the aim of finding out whether the vote share of particular parties is positively affected by higher turnout rates. While different in methods and geographical scope—and by no means conclusive—one trope that emerges from the literature is that parties on the left benefit from higher rates of turnout.

The debate is still ongoing and the question is addressed with a wide variety of methods and types of data. Most of the studies on this topic, however, are confined to the context of the United States. In the current paper, we move beyond this context and investigate the partisan effects of turnout in the Low Countries. The fact that compulsory voting in the Netherlands was abolished in 1970 offers a unique opportunity to assess the conventional wisdom from the perspective of declining turnout following from the abolition of compulsory voting.

We test this bit of conventional wisdom of the left benefiting from high turnout by means of election data from Belgium and the Netherlands since the Second World War. Belgium has mandated voting in elections since 1893 (Robson, 1923, 572). Voting was compulsory in the Netherlands between 1917 and 1970 (Irwin, 1974). This change to electoral statute provides a quasi-experimental context (the treatment condition is not randomly determined and thus this study is not a pure experimental design) to test the conventional wisdom that leftist parties do better when turnout is higher. If the conventional wisdom is correct, we should observe a decrease in the vote share of Dutch leftist parties in the post-reform period, when compared to either 1) the pre-reform period in the Netherlands or 2) the control case of Belgian leftist parties.

The outline of the paper is as follows. First, we review the literature on the partisan effects of turnout, discuss the validity of our case selection, and address how this project expands the general knowledge of turnout. Second, we describe the data used in our analyses, and the methods we use to actually analyze the data. Third, we present our findings. Lastly, we conclude with a few remarks about the relationship between turnout, vote share, and government formation in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Partisan Effects of Turnout

Compulsory voting itself has a number of systemic effects. Most obviously, compulsory voting increases turnout (Jaitman, 2013, Blais, 2006, Geys, 2006). Compulsory voting has been shown to increase the effective number of parties (Jensen and Spoon, 2011) and reduce the gap between the electorate’s interests and the interests present in the legislature (Jaitman, 2013, Louth and Hill, 2005, Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1998). Other research, however, finds compulsory voting induces uninterested and less knowledgeable voters to cast a ballot (Selb and Lachat, 2009).

But what about the effects of high turnout—and by logical association—compulsory voting on partisan outcomes? This is a question often examined in the literature. The conventional wisdom that leftist parties benefit due to increased turnout endures, despite considerable evidence from a variety of case studies showing it is misplaced.

That election laws have political and partisan consequences is well known, and has been for some time now (Grofman and Lijphart, 1986). Electoral laws that touch upon turnout, then, attract considerable attention from political parties and public officials—lest they lose standing in a new electoral regime—and from academics keen to study the effects of an electoral change.

DeNardo (1980) presents the predominant formal theoretical model explaining the partisan effects of high turnout. In an instance of high turnout we should expect the out-party to do better than in an instance of low turnout. High turnout elections mobilize a greater proportion of the electorate, and thus bring along voters with a more tenuous level of political knowledge and partisan affiliation, voters who are more likely to defect from their partisan loyalties. In short, “campaigners for the minority party should celebrate when the fickle periphery turns out in force” (DeNardo, 1980, 418). Whether turnout on its own is sufficient to change an electoral result remains an open question. Kohler and Rose (2010) describe a number of boundary conditions in addition to turnout, such as the electoral system, the number of competing parties, and the gap between the winning and runner-up parties that could alter an election result.

Australia provides an innovative case to test the conventional link between turnout and the vote share of the left. Australia has practiced compulsory voting since 1911. Fowler (2013) uses a difference-in-differences model to find the Labor vote increased following the implementation of compulsory voting. What would happen to the vote shares of the parties if, somehow, voting was

made voluntary? McAllister (1986) extrapolates from the 5% of voters who did not cast a ballot in 1977 and finds that, consistent with the conventional wisdom, lower turnout benefits the right-of-center Liberal-National alliance at the expense of the left-of-center Labor vote. Studies from the 1996 election also find a similar benefit for the Labor party by examining either a survey question about party preferences if voting was voluntary (Mackerras and McAllister, 1999) or through a study of item non-response (Jackman, 1999).

Other cases suggest particular elections where an increase in turnout may have altered the result. Simulating complete turnout in German elections suggests the left-of-center Social Democrats may have won the 1994 and 2005 elections (Kohler, 2011). Pacek and Radcliff show traditional (i.e. materialist) leftist parties benefited from high turnout between 1950 and 1990 (1995), and that leftist parties in the European Parliament benefited from increased turnout (2003). A similar trend is present among the post-Soviet elections in the 1990s, where increased turnout benefits leftist parties at the expense of the conservative and nationalist parties (Bohrer et al., 2000). Higher turnout in the 1980 and 2000 Presidential elections in the United States may have led to Democratic victories (Brunell and DiNardo, 2004). Conversely, Lutz (2007) finds increased turnout would benefit right-of-center parties in Swiss elections. Wuffle and Collet (1997) “irrefutably” demonstrate Republicans in the United States benefit from higher turnout, to the point that they wonder why the Democrats even bother to vote. Grofman (1998) questions both the Wuffle turnout effects research design and the results Wuffle and Collet report.

The United States has often been a case study in this literature, though the preponderance of findings do not lend credibility to the conventional wisdom (Grofman et al., 1999). There is little evidence of a partisan turnout bias in American Presidential elections between 1828 and 1976 (Fenton, 1979). Martinez and Gill (2005), by contrast, find a Democratic bias in earlier elections that fades away in the post-1960s period. Senatorial and Gubernatorial elections mirror a similar process, where a turnout bias in favor of the Democrats vanishes since 1965 (Nagel and McNulty, 1996). Democratic Senatorial candidates may benefit from increased turnout, but the magnitude of this benefit is small and unlikely to alter an election result (Citrin et al., 2003). In short, it is not the case that high turnout consistently benefits the Democrats; on occasion Republican candidates can benefit from increased turnout (Kaufmann et al., 2008, 145-161).

Saglie and colleagues (2012) examine turnout and the Labour party share

of the vote in Norwegian local elections, and find the two variables are not causally related. Van der Eijk and van Egmond (2007, 570) examine European Parliament elections—where turnout is chronically low¹ and thus expected to advantage right-of-center parties—but find only “exceedingly weak” results that are not indicative of a general trend. Fisher (2007) finds an association between turnout and vote share of leftist parties in national elections, but argues that this association is not causally determined, that the two trends are operating independently.

A separate stream challenging the conventional linkage between turnout and the leftist parties examines the preferences of non-voters and then estimates a plausible vote share for each party under simulated higher turnout. Rubenson and colleagues (2007) apply this logic to the 2000 Canadian Federal election. They find voters’ preferences to be largely representative of the electorate as a whole, and thus universal turnout would be unlikely to alter the election result. Sides and colleagues (2008) apply this logic to United States Presidential contests between 1996 and 2004, and find that universal turnout would have not changed election results. In contrast to this line of studies, Petterson and Rose (2007) use party sympathy scores to model the effect of universal turnout in Norwegian parliamentary elections, but find only marginal effects.

Is it also the case that lower turnout benefits the rightist parties? Evidence from New Zealand suggests this corollary to the conventional wisdom is misplaced. Nagel (1988, 26) finds that a decrease in turnout of ten percentage points is associated with a drop of 7.77 points in the vote share of the Labour party, and a rise of 9.4 points in the vote share of the minor parties. Estimating complete turnout in a comparative context reveals the main beneficiaries of increased turnout are small parties and non-incumbents (Bernhagen and Marsh, 2007). McAllister and Mughan (1986) find that the British Liberals—the predecessor to the contemporary Liberal Democrats—and not the Labour party are the beneficiaries of higher turnout in British elections between 1964 and 1983. Martins and Viegas (2014) find higher turnout disadvantages right-of-center parties in Portuguese legislative elections, but that higher turnout does not benefit the left-of-center parties.

¹Franklin (2001) demonstrates that low turnout in European Parliament elections is due, in large part, to the diminished proportion of member states with compulsory voting.

Case Selection

We investigate the partisan impact of turnout by treating the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands as a quasi-natural experiment. Therefore, we consider elections in Belgium as the control condition. The validity of our approach hence depends on the comparability of both countries. As Deschouwer (2002, p. 151) has argued, “Belgium and the Netherlands are often taken and presented together as the ‘Low Countries’, and there are good reasons for treating the two countries as part of a single category.” Indeed, on a many social and political dimensions, there are marked similarities between the two countries which render these cases ideal for our analytical purposes. Importantly, the Netherlands and Belgium have a shared history and even though important differences in terms of language and religion are linked to their separation in 1830 (Fishman, 1988), both countries still have a lot in common (Deschouwer, 2002). Belgium and the Netherlands are not only neighboring countries, they are also both relatively small countries that at the same time are at the heart of the European Union and were forerunners in the process of European integration as founding member states of the European Coal and Steel Community (Cini and Borragan, 2013). Belgium and the Netherlands are also economically similar in the sense that they are both transit economies (Hemerijck and Visser, 2000). Furthermore, the media-systems in the Netherlands and Belgium are very similar as well, and have long been dominated by strong party press (Van Aelst et al., 2008).

At a purely political level, then, both countries use a proportional electoral system (and the D’Hondt method) for allocating seats (Carstairs, 1980). Both countries are consociational, multi-party systems with a strong tradition of coalition governments (Lijphart, 2012, Timmermans and Moury, 2006, Timmermans, 2003, De Winter et al., 2000, Timmermans and Andeweg, 2000, Peterson et al., 1983). In his analysis of Westminster and consensus models of democracy, Lijphart (2012, 239-254) finds the Netherlands and Belgium are closely related to each other across the ten criteria used to define the executive-parties and federal-unitary dimensions. Party competition in both countries is marked by competition between “party families” of Christian democrats, socialists, and liberals (Deschouwer, 2002, Irwin, 1989). Furthermore, societies in both countries are clearly characterized by what Rokkan (1977) labeled ‘verzuiling’ with pillar parties as key players dominating every aspect in the lives of ‘their’ electorates. It is clear, however, that by now there is an erosion of the pillarization in both countries, although this process

has started somewhat later in Belgium (Deschouwer, 2002).

We, thus, feel safe describing Belgium and the Netherlands as “most similar” cases (Peters, 1998, 36-41). The political systems in these two countries are remarkably similar, with the obvious exception that voting is compulsory in Belgium and (at least since 1970) optional in the Netherlands. This variation in election law serves as a sorting criterion to distinguish between a control group where voting is compulsory (Belgium and pre-1970 Netherlands) and an experiment group where voting is substantially lower due to the abolition of compulsory voting (post-1970 Netherlands).

Data and Methods

We have collected a set of elections data from Belgium and the Netherlands to measure the partisan effects of turnout. These data cover 42 elections (21 in either country) between 1946 and 2012 and include 397 parliamentary parties (199 in Belgium and 198 in the Netherlands).² At the national level, we have data on turnout (measured as the number of valid ballots cast among the electorate), the effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979), a dummy variable indicating the use of compulsory voting, and the growth rate of the gross domestic product in the election year and the year prior. For each parliamentary party we have collected data on the vote and seat share, whether the party was part of the governing coalition, and the position of the party on a left-right dimension. These data are initially collected at the provincial level in Belgium and then aggregated to the national level to be comparable to national-level data in the Netherlands. Summary statistics for Belgium and the Netherlands are included in Table 1.

The position of the parties on a left-right dimension are given by data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al., 2001, Klingemann et al., 2006). The CMP conducts a text-based analysis of the contents of party platforms to place parliamentary parties somewhere on a scale between 100 and -100, with leftist parties closer to the negative end of the scale. In our data, the average party position in Belgium (161 parties, mean -3.89,

²By parliamentary party we mean a party that won at least one seat in an election. We exclude all parties that failed to gain a seat in parliament.

Table 1: Summary Statistics for Belgium and the Netherlands

		1946-1970	1971-2012
Belgium	Number of elections	8	13
	Average turnout	87.1%	85.92%
	Average effective number of parties	3.4	8.31
	Average vote share for all leftist parties	38.49%	32.6%
Netherlands	Number of elections	7	14
	Average turnout	94.7%	80.4%
	Average effective number of parties	4.92	5.4
	Average vote share for all leftist parties	34.4%	43.3%

Effective number of parties is calculated on the basis of votes.

standard deviation 15.94) is not significantly different from the Netherlands (127 parties, mean -2.89, standard deviation 18.71). The CMP does not estimate party positions for minor parties with only a handful of seats. The largest party with a missing CMP position value is the Communist party.³

Turnout in the two countries is shown in Figure 1. We observe a significant decrease in turnout in the Netherlands following the abolition of compulsory voting in 1970. Average turnout in Belgium has remained steady over time, from about 87% in the pre-1970 period to about 86% in the post-1970 period. Turnout in the Netherlands, by contrast, has decreased substantially from about 95% in the pre-reform years to about 80% in the post-reform years.

We get a somewhat different picture when we look at the vote shares. Figure 2 graphs the proportion of the vote won by all left-of-center parties in Belgium and the Netherlands. In the pre-reform years, the leftist parties in both countries won, on average, slightly more than a third of the vote (38.5% in Belgium and 34.4% in the Netherlands). In the post-reform years, however, the Dutch left won an average of 43.3% of the vote while the Belgian left reduced its average share of the vote to 32.6%. Indeed, the Dutch left never won 40% of the vote in the period 1946-1967, but won less than 40%

³The Belgian Communist party held 23 seats after the 1946 election and 12 after the 1949 election. Thereafter the party steadily lost seats until vanishing after the 1981 elections. The Dutch Communist party held 10 seats after the 1946 elections, and thereafter lost seats until disappearing after the 1982 elections. We have no reason to suggest the findings we report below are biased by the omission of data on the position of the Communist parties in either country.

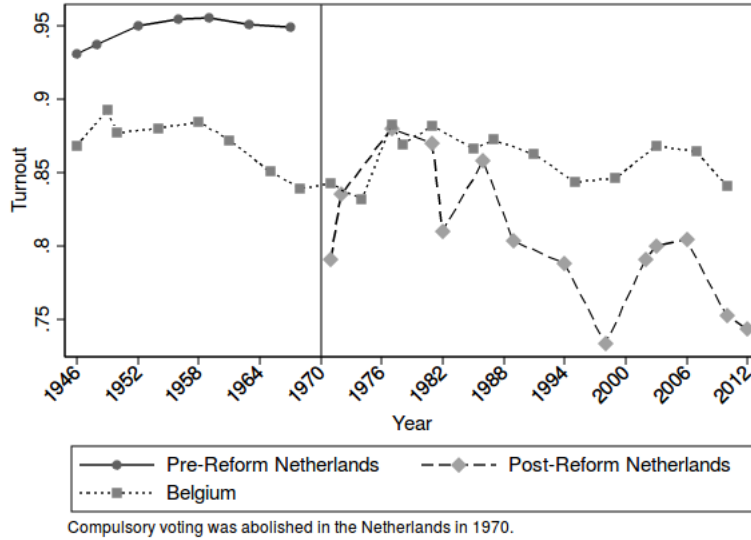


Figure 1: Turnout in Belgium and the Netherlands 1946-2012

of the vote only in the 2002 elections and in the face of the emergence of the right-wing List Pim Fortuyn (Van Holsteyn and Irwin, 2003, Pennings and Keman, 2003).

We employ a series of statistical methods to assess if turnout is significantly related to vote shares by partisan group. We first estimate a standard difference-in-differences model to assess the effect of lower turnout in post-1970 Netherlands on the vote share won by all left-of-center parties. Following from these results, we then match individual parties from both countries to test the robustness of the DID results. Lastly, we examine survey data from the Netherlands to suggest a series of explanations for the trends in turnout we observe, and use a 2009 survey from Belgium to speculate that abolishing compulsory voting would marginally increase the leftist vote share in Flanders.

For testing the individual-level mechanism linking turnout and voting for leftist parties, we rely on election survey data. For the Dutch electoral context, we make use of the cumulative file of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (1971-2006). This dataset contains repeated cross-sectional observations of representative and random sample national election surveys in the

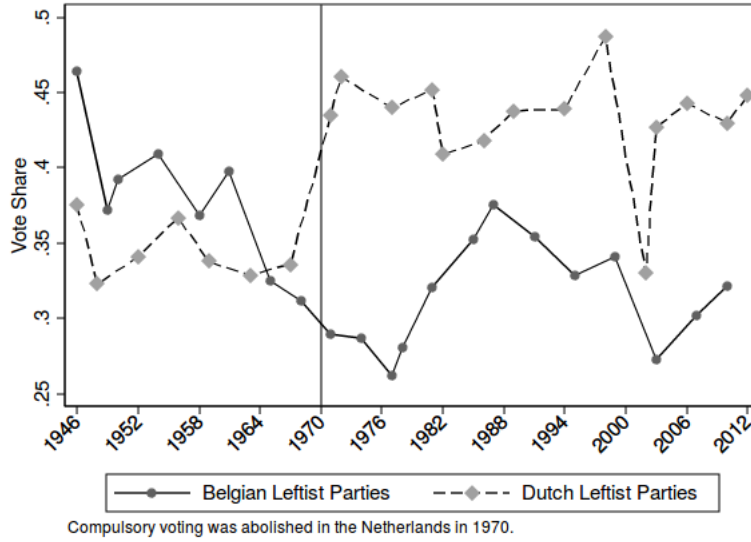


Figure 2: Leftist Vote Share in Belgium and the Netherlands 1946-2012

Netherlands (Todosijevic, B. and Van Der Kaap, 2010). The full dataset holds information on 22,821 individuals and spans 12 elections. For the current analyses, 19,070 valid observations are included (see Table 4). All election surveys were collected independently, but the cumulative dataset contains identical and harmonized variables for each survey (Schmeets and Van Der Bie, 2008). As a result, the dataset is well-suited for a pooled analysis of voting behavior in the Netherlands. For the Belgian electoral context, we make use of the data of the PartiRep Belgian election study. These data were collected at the occasion of the 2009 regional elections in Belgium. While the data had a panel-component, we only make use of information from the first pre-electoral wave. For the purposes of our analysis, the data contain information on 2,236 valid observations.

Findings

Aggregate Level Analyses

First, we adopt a difference-in-differences model⁴ to measure the effect of decreased turnout in the Netherlands post 1970 relative to the pre-reform period, and to the Belgian control case. We estimate a linear regression of the form

$$V_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 P + \beta_2 CV + \beta_3 (P \cdot CV) + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

where V_{ij} is the vote share, P is a dummy variable for the left-of-center parties in both countries, CV is the treatment (i.e. the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands) and $P \cdot CV$ is the interaction between these two dichotomous variables. If the conventional wisdom is correct, $P \cdot CV$ will be negative and significant.

Table 2 shows results from two linear models relating turnout and vote share. We find, contrary to the conventional wisdom, that lower turnout appears to benefit leftist parties in the Netherlands by, on average and across all leftist parties, about 16 percentage points. The Dutch parties are not significantly different from the Belgian parties—a sign that the two countries are similar. Furthermore, the fit of this linear model is not markedly improved by including additional control variables for the effective number of parties, the election year, or the growth rate of the gross domestic product in the year preceding an election.⁵

Party Level Analyses

We use a nearest-neighbor matching model to assess the robustness of the findings in Table 2. Estimates of a treatment effect can be calculated by comparing an outcome for a treated unit to one or more untreated units with a similar set of characteristics. In this way an observer is able to estimate the

⁴See Angrist and Pischke (2009, 227-241) for a discussion of difference-in-differences and (Card and Krueger, 1994) for a notable application of this method.

⁵These results do not differ in terms of sign, magnitude, or significance if we include the GDP growth rate in the year of an election, or per capita GDP in either year.

Table 2: Leftist Vote Share and Compulsory Voting

Vote Share	(a)	(b)
Netherlands	-0.006 (0.011)	-0.008 (0.014)
Leftist Parties	-0.271*** (0.010)	-0.285*** (0.010)
Voluntary Voting	-0.066*** (0.014)	-0.074*** (0.019)
Leftist*Voluntary Voting	0.156*** (0.017)	0.169*** (0.016)
Effective Parties		-0.002 (0.003)
Year		0.000 (0.000)
GDP_{e-1}		0.000 (0.002)
Constant	0.620*** (0.007)	0.539 (0.893)
Observations	84	72
R ²	0.917	0.936

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3: The effect of voluntary voting on vote share

	All Parties		Leftist Parties	
	ATT	N	ATT	N
Matching within country	0.039** (0.017)	288	0.062*** (0.022)	110
Matching without country	0.028 (0.019)	288	0.052** (0.026)	110

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05.

counterfactual case of no treatment a means to overcome one shortcoming of regression analysis.

Table 3 shows the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) estimated by matching a single treated party with at least two untreated parties.⁶ We separately estimate the ATT for all Belgian and Dutch parties, and for a model including—and, alternatively, excluding—the country dummy variable in the matching criteria. In addition to a country dummy variable, we match observations by election turnout, election year, and party position scores calculated by the Comparative Manifesto Project.

These results lend further support to the difference-in-differences results reported in Table 2. The treatment condition significantly increases the vote share of a leftist party by, on average, 6.2 percentage points when compared to pre-reform Dutch party data, and by an average of 5.2 percentage points when the treated Dutch leftist parties are compared to the set of all parties.

Our aggregate-level findings are in contradiction to the commonly held view that left from center parties would lose by the abolition of compulsory voting. Our results point out that leftist parties in the Netherlands are doing significantly better in elections after compulsory voting was abolished. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether we could infer from those results that especially voters preferring non-left parties are prone to abstain from voting in the low countries. In a final step, therefore, we employ data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (1971-2006) and from the 2009 Belgian regional election survey to assess the results of the abolition of compulsory voting on an individual level.

⁶The maximum number of untreated cases for each treated case ranges between 3 and 4.

Examining Dutch Survey Data

We first assess the characteristics of individual non-voters—recall that Irwin (1974) found those alienated from the political system are less likely to vote—in the Netherlands by means of the data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES). Doing so, we have to be aware of the fact that a social desirability bias causes respondents to falsely report that they turned out to voted, which is why turnout is generally over-reported in post-electoral surveys (Ansolabehere and Hersh, 2012, Karp and Brockington, 2005). Consequently, the number of respondents reporting not to have voted is usually rather low. As this holds for the DPES as well, we make use of the pooled data of several Dutch election surveys in order to have a large enough pool of abstainers to engage in meaningful analyses. As clear from Table 4, overall about 8% of the respondents in the DPES report not to have turned out to vote. While a minority, on a total of over 19,070 respondents, this amount does give us some leverage for statistically assessing the characteristics of abstainers.

Table 4: Dutch Left Voters, Non-Left Voters, and Abstainers by election year

Election year	Other party	Left party	Abstained	N
1971	57	29	14	1,855
1972	62	27	11	1,442
1977	53	38	9	1,398
1981	57	37	7	1,588
1982	55	33	11	1,497
1986	54	39	7	1,335
1989	47	45	8	1,480
1994	46	46	8	1,493
1998	40	50	9	1,758
2002	58	39	3	1,566
2003	48	47	5	1,268
2006	51	42	7	2,390
Total	52	39	8	19,070

Source: DPES 1971-2006

We assess the characteristics of abstainers and compare them to the char-

acteristics of those voting for leftist and non-leftist parties respectively. By doing so we can assess whether abstainers are closer to either the left or to the right. The inference we make is that if abstainers are more alike voters choosing leftist parties, a higher turnout or a system of compulsory voting would be beneficial to leftist parties.

Before investigating abstainers' political attitudes and their position on issues, we have a look at some socio-demographic variables. It is widely known that non-voters tend to be younger, lower educated, and belong to lower social strata compared to voters (Blais, 2000, Leighley and Nagler, 2013, Gallego, 2010). Additionally, women are generally less likely to turn out to vote than male voters. As clear from the descriptive statistics presented in Figure 3, while there are no significant differences in terms of gender, abstainers are indeed younger, lower educated and belong to lower social strata compared to voters. The data of the DPES furthermore illustrate that in terms of age, social class or income, non-voters are more similar to voters choosing leftist parties than they are to voters of other parties. In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, therefore, the individual-level results are in line with common wisdom. Only focusing on socio-demographics, we would expect non-voters to vote for leftist parties if they were obliged to turn out.

Self-evidently, other than socio-structural variables are often linked to turnout. There is a rich literature linking political attitudes such as interest in politics, strong feelings of efficacy, and trust to political participation (Gronlund and Setälä, 2007, Hetherington, 1999, Karp and Banducci, 2008). Figure 4 shows that low levels of interest in politics and a decreased sense of efficacy is associated with abstention. Comparing the political attitudes of abstainers with those of voters for left or other parties, it is clear that the main difference is one between voters and non-voters. We could not state that either left- or non-left-leaning voters are more alike abstainers in terms of these general political attitudes.

It seems as if neither the socio-demographic characteristics nor the political attitudes of leftist voters in the Netherlands can provide an explanation regarding why leftist parties did significantly better after the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands. In a next step, therefore, we look at respondents' position on a number of issues that are often framed in terms of left and right. First, we look at respondents' self placement on a 0 to 10 left-right scale. As evident from the upper left graph in Figure 5, abstainers place themselves at the ideological center. With a mean self-placement

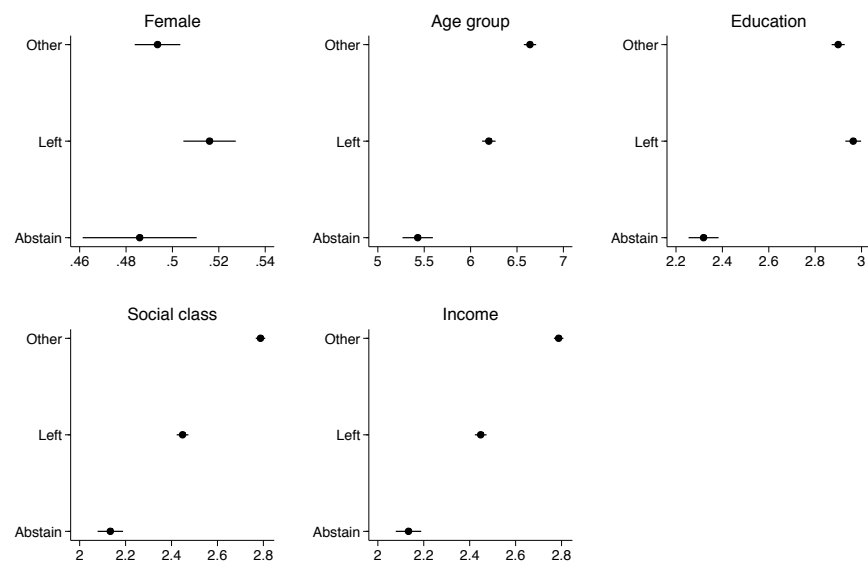


Figure 3: Means and 95% confidence intervals for socio-demographic characteristics of non-left voters, left voters and abstainers

Source: DPES 1976-2006.

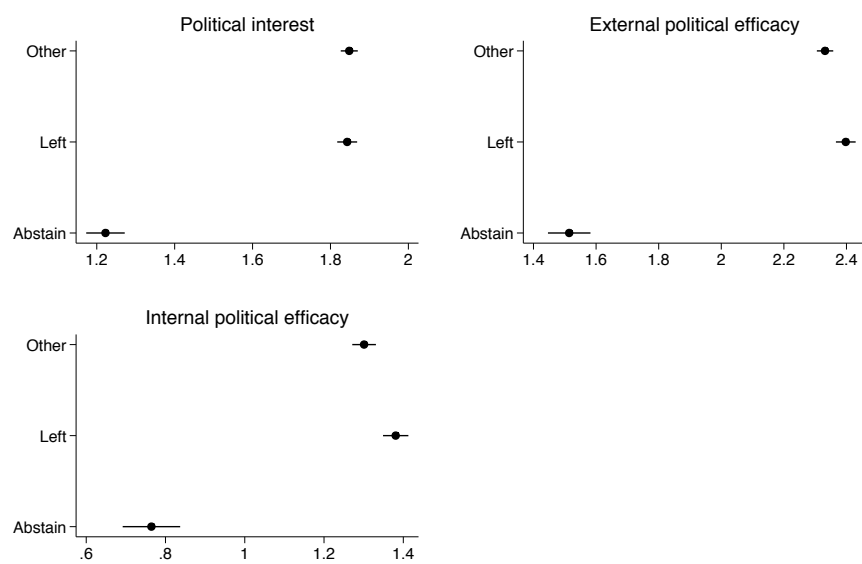


Figure 4: Means and 95% confidence intervals for political attitudes of non-left voters, left voters and abstainers

Source: DPES 1976-2006.

score of 4.96, they are at about an equal ideological distance of voters of leftist (3.44) and non-leftist (6.37) parties. The distributions on a general left-right-scale, therefore, would not lead us to conclude that either the left or the right would win if all abstainers were obliged to turn out to vote.

The policy issues included in these data allow us to see where abstainers stand relative to the left parties. Abstainers appear to be centrist in terms of a classical left-right issue as whether income difference should be smaller (more to the left is a preference for smaller income differences). Additionally, abstainers can be defined as centrist in terms of ethical issues such as euthanasia or a typical environmentalist issue as whether or not there should be nuclear plants. The most noteworthy finding in Figure 5, however, is to be seen in the two final graphs. Looking at respondents' attitudes with regard to typical conservative issues such as the position towards ethnic minorities or attitudes towards crime, abstainers are clearly right-leaning. As the descriptive statistics indicate, abstainers are stressing significantly stronger that ethnic minorities have to adjust to the Dutch culture than voters of leftist parties. Furthermore, abstainers stress more strongly than leftist voters that the Dutch government should act tougher on crime.

We started this individual-level analysis from the finding that at an aggregate level the left has surprisingly benefited from the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands. The individual-level analyses make clear that with respect to some central socio-demographic characteristics abstainers have a lot in common with the left electorate. This would then lead to the conclusion that leftist parties should have lost—and not won—when compulsory voting was abolished. A closer look at citizens' positions on different political issues, however, does give some insights on the mechanism causing the left not to suffer from the abolition of compulsory voting. While abstainers are in general to be defined as ideologically centrist, they are clearly right-leaning when it comes to issues as migration or crime. Consequently, to the extent that such issues dominate election campaigns, the right would suffer and the left would benefit from low turnout.

The Dutch data allow us to compare the characteristics of abstainers with those of leftist voters and non-leftist voters. As such, the analyses provide some hints explaining why the left has gained from the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands. The data do not provide insights on the precise individual-level vote choice effect of the fact that compulsory voting was abolished. To this end, we would need panel data following the same respondents before and after 1970. Unfortunately, no such data are available

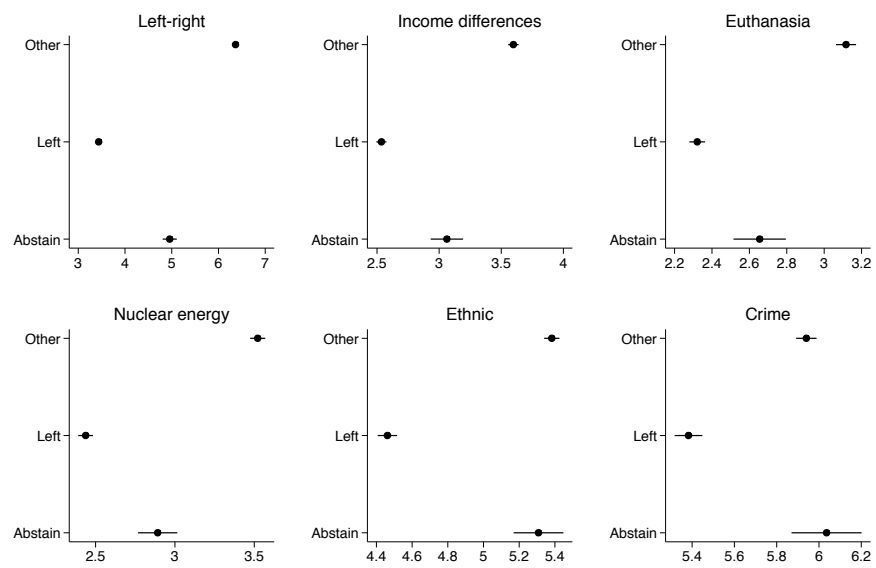


Figure 5: Means and 95% confidence intervals for issue positions of non-left voters, left voters and abstainers

Source: DPES 1976-2006.

for the Dutch context. As an alternative, we fall back on a hypothetical question on the abolition of compulsory voting that was included in the Belgian 2009 regional election survey.⁷

The question included in the 2009 election survey is the following: “If voting for parliament was no longer obliged in Belgium, would you always, most of the time, sometimes or never go out to vote?” A number of scholars have previously relied on hypothetical questions of this type to investigate the partisan effects of the abolition of compulsory voting (Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1998, Mackerras and McAllister, 1999). The use of such questions, however, has also been criticized. Jackman (1999) for example has warned for the impact of social desirability effects as well as a response bias when using this type of survey question for making inferences on the abolition of compulsory voting. We should hence interpret the results of the analyses on the 2009 election survey data with some caution.

We follow the same analytical strategy as Hooghe and Pelleriaux (1998) have done for investigating how the election results would look like if voting was no longer compulsory in Belgium. Depending on their reported probability to vote if not obliged to, respondents were assigned different weights. Respondents reporting to always vote were assigned a weight of 1.00, those reporting to vote most of the time were assigned a weight of 0.75, those who would sometimes vote were assigned a weight of 0.25 and those who reported to never vote were assigned a weight of 0.00. In order to assess the partisan impact of the abolition of compulsory voting, we subsequently present the proportion of left voters with and without this weighting correction. As Belgium basically consists of two different party systems (a Francophone one and a Flemish one), this was done for the two language groups separately.

As clear from the results in Table 5, in the Flemish electoral space the left might benefit somewhat from the abolition of compulsory voting. The estimated vote share the left would have gained if voting was not compulsory in 2009 is higher than in a context with compulsory voting. As a point of nuance, however, we should stress that the 95% confidence intervals are quite wide and overlap. Still, the fact that the left is estimated to obtain a higher vote share in Flanders if compulsory voting were abolished provides further evidence to our finding that in the low countries, the left wins and not loses

⁷Belgium regional elections cannot be considered second order national elections. The dynamics at a regional level are very similar to what holds for the federal elections (Deschouwer, 2009).

Table 5: The partisan effect of abolishing compulsory voting in Belgium

	Compulsory voting	No compulsory voting
Left vote share (Flemish)	23.93 [21.44;26.42]	27.17 [24.13; 30.20]
Left vote share (French)	52.20 [49.11; 55.30]	52.76 [49.19; 56.33]

Source: 2009 Belgian regional election study (PartiRep).

from abolishing compulsory voting. For the Francophone electoral space, then, the abolition of compulsory voting would have virtually no partisan effect.

Conclusions

Since at least the 1932 landslide victory of Democrat Franklin Roosevelt over Republican incumbent Herbert Hoover in the American presidential election, it has been thought that higher turnout benefits the Democrats in the United States and, more generally, the parties of the left. This bit of conventional wisdom has been tested in a variety of settings, and often found lacking. Nonetheless, the conventional wisdom endures.

Our intent is not to be the last word in this debate but, rather, to contribute an exceptional case to the general knowledge of turnout and its partisan effects. We depart from the typical research design by measuring the effects of the decline in turnout following the Dutch abolition of compulsory voting in 1970. Furthermore, we take advantage of the close similarity between the Netherlands and Belgium to measure vote shares for the Dutch parties in a quasi-natural experiment *vis-à-vis* a comparable Belgian control group. Contrary to the conventional wisdom and the extant literature, we find the decrease in turnout in post-1970 Netherlands contributed to a significant boost in vote share for leftist parties in the Netherlands on the order of 5 to 6 percentage points. Our analysis of Belgian survey data from 2009 also suggests that leftist parties in Flanders would increase their vote share by about 3 percentage points if, in the exceedingly unlikely event, compulsory voting in Belgium was abolished.

When it comes to explaining how our results point out that the left would benefit from lower turnout levels or the abolition of compulsory voting, we can only provide some tentative indications. Our analyses of the Dutch electoral data suggest that we have to take into account different ideological dimensions. If left and right would only be different when it comes to economical issues, then leftist parties would potentially fare less well as turnout decreases. It is on other dimensions, however, such as crime or migration that abstainers are outspokenly right-leaning. As a consequence, the rise of new dimensions of political conflict in Western Europe can be considered crucial here (Kriesi et al., 2012). Before generalizing our results outside of the low countries, therefore, it is essential that we take into account the political space and the ideological dimensions on which left and right parties position themselves.

An increase in vote share, however, does not necessarily translate into less complicated and more stable governing coalitions. As Timmermans (2003) shows, the length in words of coalition agreements in both Belgium and the Netherlands has increased over time. As a result of the 1977 and 1982 elections in the Netherlands, the PvdA emerged as the largest party, but did not form a governing coalition, as a deal with either the Christian Democrats or the Liberals (VVD) was politically impossible (Timmermans and Andeweg, 2000, 370). Belgium is perhaps a more extreme case of this phenomenon; parties more often enter office after electoral losses than victories (De Winter et al., 2000, 352). The cabinet which emerged from a protracted series of negotiations following the 2010 elections is, in this regard, typical. In this instance, the New Flemish Alliance won the largest share of seats, but ultimately the runner-up Francophone Socialist Party formed a cabinet.⁸ In short, the benefit of a larger vote share is moderated—and sometimes altogether erased—by the dynamics of coalition formation.

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⁸At the time of this writing, the negotiations to form a cabinet from the 2014 elections are underway.

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